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The Function of the Public Library in a Democracy

By John H. Loetscher



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- An address delivered by John H. Leete, Director of the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, at the annual meeting of the Pennsylvania State Educational Association in Philadelphia in December 1919.



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THE FUNCTION OF THE PUBLIC LIBRARY IN A DEMOCRACY

The public library is fundamentally and logically a democratic institution. Established by municipal or state law and maintained by public funds, it offers to all equal privileges under as few restrictive qualifications and requirements as are consistent with efficient service. The inscription found upon so many library buildings, "Free to all the people," expresses concisely and literally the purpose and justification of the library's existence.

But even an institution conceived and established in such a democratic atmosphere may fail to realize its full value as a servant of the democracy which created it. Moreover, conditions change rapidly—just how rapidly we of to-day are well qualified to judge. It is therefore not only proper but absolutely necessary that the public library of to-day should ask itself whether it is in harmony with the conditions of to-day and to examine searchingly and honestly whether it is returning full value and its highest service to the community which maintains it. Nothing less than that high standard will fulfil the obligation to democracy, or satisfy the conscience of the public library.

There is no occasion to speak of one function of the library. We all of us, know its value as a recreational agency in the community. Indeed, the public too often regards this as the sole purpose of the library's existence. Too many think of it as a place where one may borrow without expense the transient novel that he does not consider worth buying for himself. Yet that statement is hardly fair to the public library, cosmopolitan and charitable as it must be to satisfy the widely varying tastes of its community. For we know that even a public library exercises some discrimination in the choice of its books, and it does try, by hook and by crook, to interest readers in things worth reading. Indeed, that is one of its ways of serving the community. That effort is not always successful, however. You recall the old story of the elderly maiden of unsatisfied romantic temperament who returned to a city library a novel by Laura Jean Libbey with the remark that she would like another book "just as good." The assistant, with an eye to literary uplift, asked if she had read "The Kentucky Cardinal." "I'm not fond of theological reading," was the reply. "But this cardinal was a bird," said the persistent assistant. "That doesn't commend him to me," was the reply as she carefully selected another volume by her favorite author.

That incident didn't happen in Pittsburgh, for, through some unaccountable oversight, no alcove in our library has been dedicated to Miss Libbey. I wish

that I might say that on our shelves there are no books of similar flabbiness; but I suppose that the library, like the apothecary, must provide "pink pills for pale people." However, it is a comfort to remember that the same twenty-six letters of the alphabet, so silly, simple, and meaningless by themselves, which compounded by an anemic and melancholic sentimentalist give us a product which almost makes us regret the invention of the art of printing—these same twenty-six simple letters in the hands of a master can produce a "Mill on the Floss", a "Vanity Fair", "A Tale of Two Cities", a "Les Miserables." The library possibly has no occasion to emphasize its function as a recreational agency, but it certainly does not need to apologize for it. In this day of hurry and bustle, in this day of work and struggle, surely the diverting pleasure and the inspiration of a good book is of some value. Moreover, even through the despised door of fiction one may steal a glimpse of travel and of history, of philosophy, and even of religion, which may attract us into more instructive fields.

And there are some books which scarcely deserve the contumely which is heaped upon the much abused fiction. What is there of value to-day of all days, in art, in science, in philosophy, in religion, in history, that has not found a place in the printed page! We have left far behind the day when the statesman and the philosopher depended upon the spoken word; when the poet's audience was limited by the small circle his

song could reach; when it was necessary to travel to the dark continent to know it; when one had to visit the Panama Canal to understand its construction. To-day the arctics and the tropics, the Occident and the Orient, the city and the desert, are brought to our very firesides. We may even visit other worlds with Newton and Herschel. Not only space, but the limitations of time also are annihilated. Through books we may live in the times of Cæsar and Ptolemy, we may have the counsel of Confucius and Solomon, we may discover a new world with Columbus, we may fight by the side of Alexander and Napoleon, we may see the visions of the Crusaders and of Joan of Arc. We may know the men of all ages more intimately than even their contemporaries knew them. Through books all the accomplishments and failures of many generations of men, all their hopes and their fancies, their beliefs and their doubts, are available for our understanding and progress. Truly the library is a wonderful treasure-house of knowledge that has in it many possibilities for personal culture and abundant opportunities for practical service. Under date of December fifth of this year Mrs. Rinehart writes: "I am constantly amazed by the efficiency of the Reference Department, on which I have made frequent demands, and which has never failed to give me more than I have requested. I have taxed it sometimes, but there seems to be no subject from Clothes to Cannibals, from Dogs to Dogmatism, from Zoology to Zymotic Diseases (which is

the very last article in the Encyclopædia Britannica), which the library cannot supply. It is a storehouse of frightful and incredible facts. It knows a tremendous amount, and quite frequently I take what it knows, twist it about a bit and sell it as original material by Mary Roberts Rinehart."

Yes, all the materials for service, for big service, are available. But if this treasure, this raw material for service, is to be a potent factor in this practical world, if it is to be a useful agency in democracy, the library must be more than a storehouse of treasure, it must be a laboratory for instruction and research. It must not be a thing like one's religion, too often drawn upon only on Sundays and holidays. It must not be a place to be visited only when there is no other place to go, or nothing else to do. It must go hand in hand with the interests of the community and the work of the community. It must be a part of the day's work and the day's play of the individual members of the community. Its material must be organized—and organized in such a way that the library becomes a useful and recognized complement to all the neighborhood interests, activities, and industries. The library must not stand alone, but must form intimate associations with other community agencies and through them and with them find a definite work to do.

The school is the social organ established by the state to direct the conservation and development of the most valuable of its resources, the youth of the nation.

"To make democracy safe for the world" we have established at enormous public expense a system of free schools for both the betterment of the individual and the safeguarding of the state. In this work the library can be of vital assistance to the school by bringing the wealth of its material to enrich and broaden the formal courses of study. Interest and even enthusiasm may be created in a tedious task, by bringing dry facts into relation with the forces and conditions affecting human life and activity. Much has been done in this direction within the last score of years. I remember full well the absurdities of the old style courses in geography with which the earlier generation was afflicted. Hours were spent in learning to bound the states in the Union, but of the essential facts in the physical life of those states, of their climate, their soil, their products, their manufactures, the character of their population, their railroad facilities and waterways, we learned nothing. Idaho was to us a green area on a perfectly flat surface surrounded by other areas of different colors. Moreover, we came to have a real distrust of the accuracy of that text from the fact that we knew that our own state of Michigan was not really pink as it was represented, but had a coat of many colors in which the greens, or reds, or browns predominated with the changing seasons of the year.

And in history; that wonderful study of the origin and development of the individual and the race, of their work and their play, their ambitions and their

appetites, their arts and their literature, their crafts and their inventions, their commerce and their laws, their philosophy and their religion, and incidentally, but only incidentally, their battles and their wars! History—captivating, romantic, and red-blooded, so full of adventure and inspiring achievement—was reduced to the dry husks of dates of wars and battles, arbitrary and often partisan statements of their causes and effects, and the empty names of rulers and generals.

And the study (?) of the English language! That wonderful vehicle for revealing thought, or for concealing it, with its infinite variations in style, now striking with the sledge-hammer blows of a Macaulay, now caressing with the delicate touch of a Keats or of a Wordsworth; with its palette of many colors for the painting of pictures for the inner eye; with its thousands of sparkling jewels of prose and of verse. Even English may be and often is a dull thing of parsing and of diagrams, and of them only.

And so I might take up in detail the other subjects of our formal courses of study, but you already see the point I am trying to make. The library has something to contribute to the formal courses of study in our schools—something vitalizing, something inspiring, something broadening for teacher and pupil alike. A single text-book is a genuine source of danger in the class room. “One-book” education is apt to mean narrowness, shallowness, pedantry, partisanship, lack of

interest, and an entirely unwarranted satisfaction in the completeness of the pupils' education. "One-book" education means that useless thing, a finished education. Let us substitute for one book, many books, and so obtain the perspective which makes mere facts valuable. Let us bring the library to the school through many books, by reading and story hours, and even by admitting under proper precautions that dangerous person, the local librarian. Let us bring the school to the library by individuals and by classes.

But the school is expected to teach other things than arithmetic, spelling, English, and geography. We have had too recently a disastrous example of the futility, nay, the danger, of expecting mere formal learning to guarantee that social justice and righteousness which must prevail if democracy is to live. And how may patriotism and courage and loyalty be taught better than by the lives and deeds of the heroes of all ages! I have seen ideals of good sportsmanship established firmly and permanently in the mind of a twelve year old boy by stories of minor heroes in the athletic world. And the other virtues of character! What a wealth of material is contained in the library's world of books! And his outlook upon the future, his future, his vision of the part he is to play in the great drama of life—a thing the boy can't bring himself to put into cold words—but about which he wonders and dreams. What for him can take the place of inspiring biography or the more directly practical book

on the vocational fields? Yes, the library has much to contribute to the rounding out and humanizing and practicalizing and idealizing of school life. President Harper was right when he said, "In the really modern (educational) institutions, the central building is the library."

The great contribution of the public library to the life of democracy, however, is made after the pupil has finished his formal schooling. Indeed, without underestimating the value of the library as a complement to the school, I believe it may fairly be said that the greatest benefit obtained from bringing the school to the library and the library to the school is found in the impetus it gives the graduate of the school to use the library. Just a few days ago a man prominent in the work of the Catholic War Reconstruction Board said to me, "I don't think much of the education of a boy who doesn't graduate from the school into the library," and of course, I agreed with him. You may conclude that I have lost my sense of perspective. Objects near our particular point of vision do loom large. We should hesitate to agree that "the greatest calamity suffered by the world in the last century was the invention of the safety razor." But the man who said it believed it—he was a barber. So you may think that I am magnifying the value of the library to the community; but is that the fact?

Records show that the average American boy goes to school, or more accurately speaking, is sent to

school, for a period of less than six years. It is true that the state provides the opportunities of free education for a much longer period, but the average boy either cannot or will not take advantage of the opportunities offered. It may be his lack of aptitude for study; it may be just the restlessness that comes with the growing pains of youth; it may be the sheer force of circumstances; it may be the positive command of duty that draws or drives him from the school-house. It is not my province to advance any theory of the cause of this unfortunate situation or to propose any remedy to cure it. I shall not even consume your time with lamentations, but shall simply state the fact. The door of the school-house closes to the great majority of the children of our democracy at the end of six brief years.

We have learned, it is true, to concentrate a good deal of information and some training in the period allotted us. It is not all that might be given, even in the best schools, because of imperfections of teachers and methods. We do not do all that might be done for any particular individual, because in the school we must teach not individuals but classes. But let us suppose that we have that millennial combination, a model school and a model group of students—what subjects can be covered under ideal conditions in those short six years? Arithmetic, spelling, some English grammar, a little geography and less history, and possibly a delicate smattering of another subject or

two which for the time being constitutes the accepted cure-all for ignorance or the approved recipe for culture. With that modicum of learning, this boy of ours goes from the school-house back to the farm, to the mill, to the factory, to the shop, to the thousands of occupations in our widely diversified civilization in which unskilled labor finds its humble place. He becomes one of the thousand men of the dinner pail that we pass on the streets of our large cities. The question that comes to the minds of all socially minded men and women is this: Is this short school training sufficient for the boy's needs? Is it sufficient for his needs as a wage earner? Will it make him a happy, contented, and useful man? Is this school training of itself sufficient to meet his needs as a citizen? Does it meet the requirements of democracy?

There can be but one answer to that question, and that answer is No. Economically, with that amount of training and that only, the boy is doomed as a wage earner to routine tasks that can only bring happiness and contentment with the deadening of his ambition. With that amount of training alone and without the incentive to carry on his mental development in some direction and by some means, the boy suffers an intellectual death. As a man, he becomes one of those disappointed, discontented individuals for whom happiness is impossible in this world or the next. As a citizen, he is apt to become one of the mob—unreasonable, destructive, the prey of the agitator and dem-

agogue—who make democracy a menace. No, the school cannot finish its contract to make men and citizens in six short years of training; it can only start the job. To that training in the use of the tools of education must be added an incentive to further study, an inspiration to learning. It is this incentive, this inspiration, which constitutes the greatest contribution of the public school to democracy. With it even the boy of limited school training may go far. Without it, even the university graduate is in danger of proving a failure.

There are, of course, many factors that make for the development of the boy or the man after he has graduated from the public school or the university. Contact with men of brains; social activities; business associations and competition; the organized training of continuation schools, extension courses, and study clubs; and many other agencies combine to broaden his understanding and sharpen his intellect. In this program surely there is some place for the printed page—the printed page that played so important a part in the greatness of Lincoln, and Franklin, and Herbert Spencer, and Stanley, and Faraday, and Edison, for all of whom the door of the school was never fairly open.

“All information in print must be readily accessible to all the community” is the educational slogan of the public library of to-day. It is this program which has given it the title of the “People’s University.” The teacher who classifies and evaluates education and ed-

ucational institutions solely upon their entrance requirements, may question the library's right to be called a university, since the only qualifications for admittance we demand are the ability to read, and a thirst for knowledge. It has no attendance regulations and no examinations. Nor can the library base its claim to the title "university" upon the prerogative of granting that *summum bonum* of higher education, the college degree. The library uses no hall-mark of learning. Indeed, its ambition is never to graduate a student. We shall have to admit, also, that our courses are extremely irregular; they vary in length from a few hours to months, or even years, of study. Nor have we a fixed program of studies; they are all electives, and we are so unconventional as to offer instruction in any subject upon the application of a single student! Nor are we committed to any religion or to any school of thought. Judged by these conventional standards, it is true that the library would have difficulty in gaining acceptance as a bona fide university.

Notwithstanding these deficiencies in academic standards, the library has a real claim to the title of "People's University." It has for its faculty the master minds not only of to-day but of yesterday. True, the inspiration of their physical presence is lacking, but the structures into which they put their best thoughts and efforts are still standing, the fabric into which was woven the real expressions of their inner lives and ideals remains. And who shall deny the

inspiration of the masterpiece even though the master be gone. The many residents of our colleges who pass in a desultory way through the successive stages of culture denominated as freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior, whose degree of attainment is indicated solely by the color of the cap they wear and finally by the bachelor's gown, may fail to find in the library their sole incentive to learning, the big stick of the Dean; but the genuine student will find there not only the raw materials of learning but the inspiration as well. The library is one democratic institution for the best and most genuine education, self education.

We shall have to admit, however, that the enrollment of students in the "People's University" has not been at all commensurate with the service it stands ready to offer. The public library always has been and always will be the resort of the bookish man—but bookish people do not constitute the majority of the community. We have a service to offer the non-bookish man—the man who has not learned the value of the printed page in solving present day problems. What are we doing for him? There is a great industry in our neighborhood. Have we the material on our shelves that will interest and benefit the ambitious workman in that plant? Not the exhaustive treatise, but the readable elementary book which tells in a simple way the science and the facts of the job he is doing for his daily bread. Possibly we have that material—but does the workman know it? He will not know it

through unattractive book lists on the library desk, which are free to the public but which the public do not take freely. Something must go to that man in his shop—something that will arouse his curiosity and stimulate his interest. It may be an attractive circular, it may be a photostat copy of a page of a work or of a machine, posted on the bulletin board—not the bulletin board of the library, but of the shop. The message of the definite service the library can render him must be delivered to him at his bench. And when he comes to the library in response to that personal message, he must have placed in his hands the book that we have told him is waiting for him. Any other service will result in his first visit to the library becoming his last pilgrimage to that shrine.

To render this particular service, the librarian must know his community—not only the part that comes to the library, but the part that never comes—the whole community—its interests, its work, its play, its problems. That means that the library must be an active community center, a place where the many civic and welfare activities gather, an organization which touches the many sided life of the community. This cannot be accomplished by simply wishing it; it can come only as - the result of work—hard work—and that hard work can only be done effectively by a systematic plan and organization. It must be someone's business, not everyone's ideal. Just how this may best be accomplished for a particular library depends upon the community,

the organization, the problem. In Pittsburgh we have adopted the plan of a community work committee. It is the function of that committee to co-ordinate the work of the various Library agencies, to keep all agencies informed of the methods found effective by any single worker or agency, to devise ways and means of solving special problems as well as of systematizing the community work in general. It is a clearing house of community methods and work that has proved very effective in our library. Let me mention just a few things it has done and is doing. Under its direction data has been collected concerning the many organizations of the city, and as a result the Library is an information center for all civic and welfare work. At frequent intervals representatives of these organizations present to a group of Library workers the purpose and plan of their work. In every instance the Library has found some means of serving these organizations, a service that in every case has been cordially welcomed. The Library is also carrying on extensive community work of its own. Travel clubs, debating clubs, current events clubs have been formed by the Library, and many other outside clubs and societies use the Library buildings. Stories are told and book talks are given not only in the Library and at the schools, but in commercial plants, settlement houses, and other charitable institutions. Effective Americanization work is being carried on—a campaign of instruction for the foreign born that is not confined to

the four walls of the Library, but carries its message of understanding and of instruction to the home by personal visits as well as by the printed page. Many are the expedients used by the Library in its attempt to be of real service to all the varied interests of the community. It has been possible to accomplish but a small part of the work that has opened up before us; but small as it has been, it has been sufficient to prove not only the value of community work in itself, but also its value in making the more conventional forms of library service effective. It has also proved of great value in establishing the Library in the community as a community necessity.

The possibilities of the library seem almost limitless. Certainly they are far greater than we have yet realized. But you say, how can the library with its limited staff and still more limited funds undertake a work of such magnitude. If we had a larger staff, if we had a better trained staff, if we had more books, if we had many things which we would like to have and which we ought to have, what a work we could do! But all these things spell money. And those five letters do not occur often in the library vocabulary. That is true—no one knows it better than we do in Pittsburgh. We do need more money for the bigger job—but the surest way to get more money is to start the bigger job.

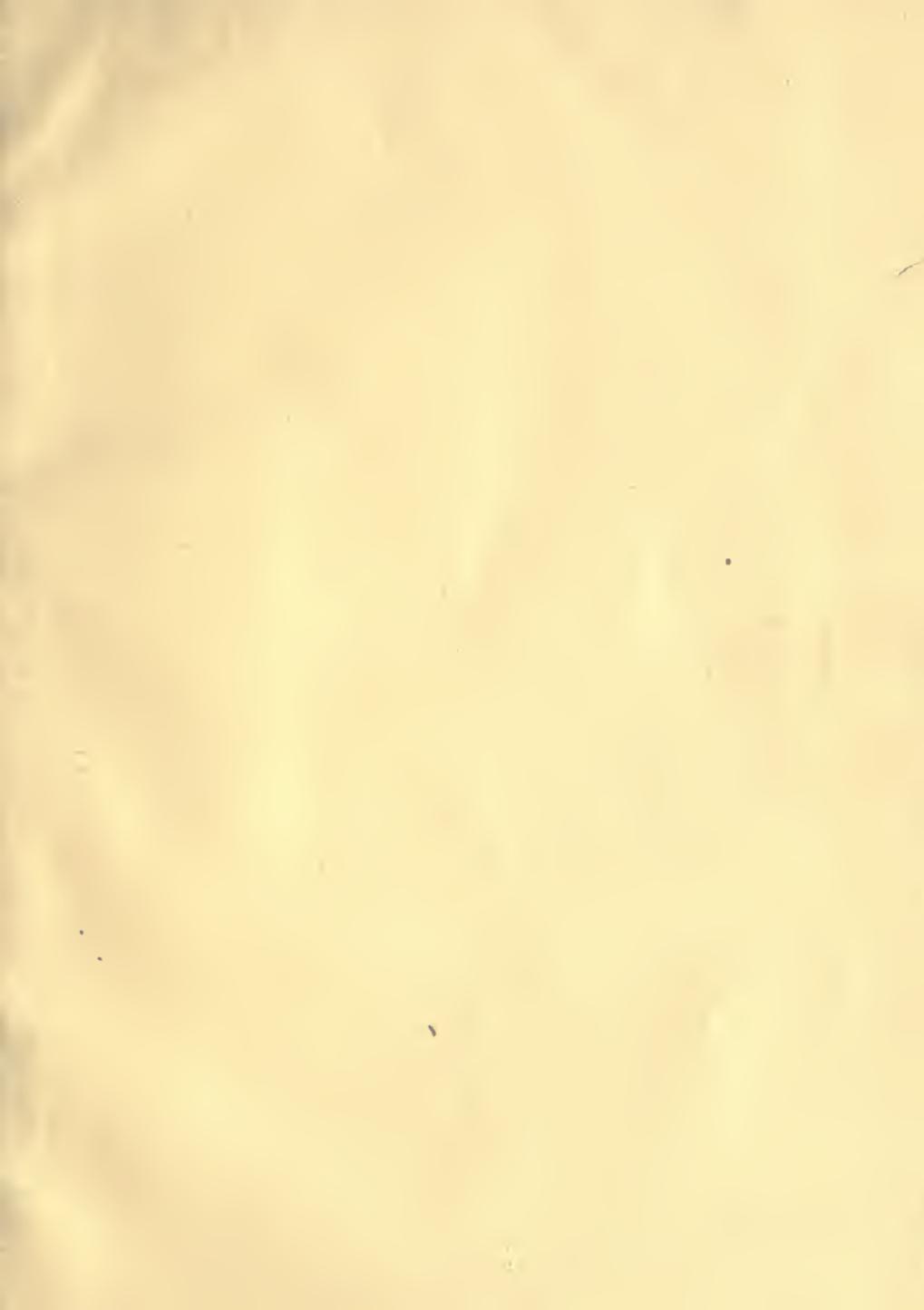
These are but a few of the paths of service open to the public library. Of the need of that service, partic-

ularly in the unsettled and perplexing and critical conditions of to-day, there can be no question. The problems to be settled are economic, racial, political, vocational, educational; and in all these fields the library is pre-eminently qualified and equipped to render most valuable service to democracy. As a recreational agency, as an information center, and as an educational institution it has not only an opportunity but an obligation to fulfil.

You remember the incident of the demagogue in the French Revolution who said, "There go the people; let us hurry and overtake them—I am their leader." Let us not be content with the kind of leadership that follows; let us stand for the leadership that leads.









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